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ABSTRACT

Forty-eight professors of English or education at state universities throughout the United States were surveyed to discover what concepts state institutions were emphasizing in English writing. The survey asked 10 preliminary questions about what writing courses were offered or required for prospective undergraduate English teachers and 13 questions about the writing methods courses. Responses, obtained from 32 professors (a 67% response rate), indicate that all but two of the institutions require two or more courses in writing or language for prospective teachers, and 15 universities require four to six courses in composition or language. However, only 20 institutions require a methods course on how to teach writing. Of those writing methods courses, 84% emphasize the process of writing including prewriting, writing, revision, and different methods of evaluation. The three areas treated least extensively in these courses are writing fiction, developing plans to teach writing in the classroom, and weekly writing assignments. These results suggest that at a time when colleges, universities, and employers are complaining about writing illiteracy, a thorough course to prepare teachers to teach their students writing skills is imperative. (Appended is a table summarizing the concepts most frequently emphasized in writing methods courses.) (HOD)

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Current Trends: Writing Methods Courses for Prospective English Teachers

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The declining literacy of American students has received widespread attention in the last ten years. Although lower SAT and ACT scores have been cited as proof of this declining literacy, the inadequate writing skills of students have also been criticized. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federally funded research organization reported a decline among seventeen-year-olds during the 1969-74 period in overall quality, in word length (an indication of vocabulary diversity), and in paragraph coherence. The latest nationwide survey by this organization of the writing skills of children nine, thirteen, and seventeen found no overall improvement in student writing during the past ten years. United States News and World Report summarized the results of this most current study: "Up to a fourth of the nation's pupils 'have massive problems with written language.'"[1] This lack of writing ability has been deplored by college and university professors. One college English teacher said: "'That students entering college

[1] "Their To Many Kids Who Can't Rite Good," United News and World Report, January 26, 1981, p. 10.

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lack a basic knowledge of grammar and punctuation is bad enough, but it's only one part of the problem. The most frustrating and saddest part is that very few of them can write a unified, coherent paragraph.'"[2] Because of the poor quality of student writing, colleges and universities have had to provide remediation for students in this area. Thomas Wheeler reports that "at the University of California at Berkeley, where students come from the top 12.5 percent of high school graduating classes, nearly half of the entering freshmen display such inadequacies in writing that they are required to take remedial courses."[3] At such prestigious institutions as the University of Michigan and the University of Georgia, one term of freshman English has been replaced by remedial writing courses. Higher education's concern with secondary students' inadequate writing skills is further emphasized by the 1978 addition of an essay section to the CLEP English Examination and by the insistence of increasing numbers of colleges and universitites that students take the English Composition Achievement test in addition to the objective sections of the SAT.

Gene Lyons expressed a typical attitude of college professors when he declared: "American students are not learning to write because nobody bothers to teach them how."[4] Writing has

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[2] A. Brandt, "Why Kids Can't Write," Family Circle, 1981, p. 20.

[3] T. Wheeler, The Great American Writing Block (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 1.

[4] G. Lyons, "The Higher Illiteracy," Harper's, 1976, p. 38.

been neglected in American school systems for a number of complex reasons.

First, an increasing emphasis on technology is changing the values and lifestyle of our society. We telephone rather than write letters. We use television for educational as well as entertainment purposes. Although writing experts do not deny the influence of television on students, they lament rather than praise this visual medium. Television has deprived young people of the ability to concentrate. Also, when students watch television, less time is spent reading. Writing experts, educators, and professional writers see reading and writing as highly interrelated skills. Through reading the language students gain a familiarity with and appreciation for sentence structure, word choice, and logical thought.

Ironically, another negative influence on writing has been the deletion of essay writing as a requirement for college entrance. Without colleges requiring competent writing for admission and the subsequent emphasis of objective testing, less writing has been required of students in public schools. In fact, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the College Board's Achievement Test in Composition was a multiple choice test which required no writing! One writer and college professor has stated adamantly, "The university, by sanctioning the objective system, bears a terrible responsibility for the decline of writing in the United States."[5]

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[5] Wheeler, p. 17.

Other trends have plagued the public school system and interfered with the teaching of writing. In the late sixties and early seventies electives (often literature classes) became increasingly popular in English departments, with a corresponding decrease in writing. For example, the College board published a report stating that "enrollment in English composition courses in California high schools dropped 77 percent between 1972 and 1975, while enrollment in those elective courses which required little writing almost doubled."[6]

Also, some believe that writing cannot be taught. Somehow, this activity is viewed as a talent or gift that one either does or does not possess. This attitude has been reinforced by the lack of research studies on the process of writing. The authors of Research in Written Composition, published in 1973 and a classic in English education, indicated that "today's research in composition...may be compared to...the period of alchemy. Some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations."[7] Only in the sixties and seventies has large scale research in the composing process been conducted, and there are many areas of writing that still need to be evaluated.

This lack of research has in turn affected the training of English teachers. O'Donnell surveyed 176 articles in Research

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[6] Brandt, p. 20.

[7] R. Braddock et al., Research in Written Composition (National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p. 5.

in the Teaching of English and discovered that "less than one half dozen dealt specifically with the preparation of Eng'ish teachers."[8] Also, at a 1973 conference of junior college and university teachers meeting in Illinios, the consensus was that composition was most often neglected in the training of junior-college English teachers.[9] In a more formal study questionnaires were sent to seventy-eight state and private institutions inquiring about the requirements of prospective English teachers in the area of writing. Seventy-four percent of the seventy-eight schools required only one course in advanced composition, fourteen institutions only recommended a course, and at six schools no course was required or recommended. The conclusion of the study was that at twenty-five percent of the institutions polled, advanced composition was still not required of prospective secondary English teachers.[10] Many people have commented

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[8] R. C. O'Donnell, "Research in the Teaching of English: Some Observations and Questions," English Education, 10 (1979), pp. 181-183, quoted in E. R. Sagan and C. H. Laine, "Two Perspectives of Undergraduate English Teacher Preparation," Research in the Teaching of English, 14, no. 1 (Feb., 1980), p. 46.

[9] D. Nemanich, "Preparing the Composition Teacher," College Composition and Communication, (1974), p. 46.

[10] R. Larson, "A Special Course in Advanced Composition for Prospective Teachers," The Journal of Teacher Education, (1969), p. 170.

that the emphasis on the university level has traditionally been on literary analysis. Hence, English teachers' training has been predominantly in literature rather than composition. When these teachers in turn begin their careers in the public school system, their teaching is heavily accented toward literature rather toward composition.

Obviously the reasons for students' writing problems are many and complex. The purpose of this paper was to focus on one aspect--the training of prospective English teachers. The study attempted to discover what concepts state institutions are emphasizing in English writing methods courses. The following question were explored:

How many state universities require prospective English teachers to take a methods course specifically devoted to how to teach composition on the secondary level?

What trends for teaching composition are being emphasized in these undergraduate writing methods courses?

What can current English teachers learn from these teacher training courses to improve their own instruction in the teaching of writing?

What can college professors engaged in writing methods courses learn from what other professionals are doing across the country?

Obviously, this survey was not a definitive analysis of programs or of methods. Only a general picture of teaching trends in composition was sought. Also, course content was not

compared against any previously determined standard. The study was conducted to obtain information that secondary and college teachers of writing would find interesting and helpful in structuring, organizing, and teaching their own writing programs.

Definition of Terms

Composing: Composing was defined as the mental and physical act of putting ideas together in a logical pattern on paper. The four stages of pre-writing, writing, revision, and evaluation were included in this process. This process could include nonfiction or fiction writing.

Evaluation: Evaluation was the appraisal of the strong and weak aspects of a completed written product (paper, essay, theme), including development of ideas, style, usage, and punctuation. In this study the final stage of the process of writing, evaluation, could be made by the writer or the reader, who could be a peer, parent, or teacher.

Fiction: Fiction referred to the writing of poetry or short stories.

Invention: Invention was defined as the finding and organizing of data and the generation of ideas.

Mode: Mode included the forms of writing: narration, description, exposition, persuasion, argumentation.

Non-fiction: Non-fiction referred to objective or subjective essays.

Pre-Writing: In this study pre-writing was defined as the first stage in the process of writing which included that span of time from a thought occurring to assignment given to the writing of the first complete rough draft.

Process: Process was defined by Petrosky and Brozick as "how writers compose, how their conscious and unconscious minds interact, how they interact with each other, how they interact with pen and paper, and how these interactions influence the development of both writers and of their writing abilities."[11]

Product: The final written essay to be evaluated by a reader or writer was the product of composing.

Research: The term research referred to studies which included a research design, with observable, measureable outcomes, whether historical, descriptive, or statistical.

Revision: Revision was defined as any changes made on a paper after the completion of the rough draft or initial written pattern of logical thought. Revision included elimination or addition of ideas, changes in sentence pattern, or word choice as well as correction of usage or punctuation.

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[11] A. Petrosky and J. Brozick, "A Model for Teaching Writing Based upon Current Knowledge of the Composing Process," English Journal, (1979), p. 96.

Rhetoric: Rhetoric consisted of a series of specific questions the writer asks concerning the subject, the audience, the purpose, and the techniques that would be employed to communicate effectively.

Strategies: Strategies were methods or techniques that could be used to teach part of or all of the process of writing including pre-writing, writing, revision, and evaluation.

Writing: The second stage of the process of composing was writing. Writing consisted of the completion, ordinarily in one sitting, of a logically developed pattern of thought written on paper. Pausing for thinking, diversions, or rest as well as rescanning what had been written and minor revisions during this process were included.

Methods

Subjects

Subjects were forty-eight professors of English and/or education who taught at state universities throughout the United States. State universities were chosen for this survey because these institutions usually have teacher training programs. Subjects indicated that they had been teaching composition methods courses anywhere from one to eighteen years with the average number of years being eight. The respondents, then, were ordinarily experienced in this aspect of teacher training. In fact eighty-four percent who answered the questionnaire indicated that the teaching of writing was their specialty.

Instrument

A four-page survey instrument was developed after a thorough, although not exhaustive, research of the literature on the teaching of writing was conducted. (Approximately one hundred articles and fifteen books were read which enumerated current theories, trends, and practices in the teaching of writing.) Ten preliminary questions asked what writing courses were offered or required for prospective undergraduate English teachers. The survey on the writing methods course consisted of thirteen questions with a four-point scale: Never True, Occasionally True, Often True, Always True. A four-point rather than a five-point Likert scale was chosen to avoid respondents falling

too much into the middle range. One free-response question at the end asked: "Do you have any other comments you would like to make concerning teaching composition on the college, secondary, or middle school levels?" There are no validity or reliability data available on this instrument.

Procedure

After the instrument was developed, it was field tested. Two professors at the Unviersity of Utah and one professor at Brigham Young University who teach writing methods courses were asked to take the survey. In consultation with the researcher, questions were restated, others eliminated, and some added. The format of the instrument was also improved to allow more room for response. A short, one-page cover letter was composed which stated the background of the researcher, the sponsoring institution, and the purpose of the research. Respondents had two weeks to fill out the questionnaire and return it before the October 31, 1981 deadline. A self-addressed stamped envelope was included with the survey and cover letter.

Results

Of the forty-eight questionnaires that were sent, thirty-two were returned for a sixty-seven percent response rate. All but two institutions of the thirty-two responding require two or more courses in writing and/or language for prospective

English teachers, and fifteen universities require four to six courses in composition and/or language. However, only twenty institutions or sixty-three percent required a methods course on how to teach writing. This figure is lowered to fifty percent when four professors indicated that the required methods course does not deal exclusively with the teaching of writing. Ten institutions, then, had no required course in how to teach composition for prospective English teachers. The other trends that were emphasized in the required or recommended writing methods course are summarized in Table 1. Eighty-four percent of the courses emphasized the process of writing including pre-writing, writing, revision, and different methods of evaluation. Of least concern in these courses were writing fiction (thirteen percent) and writing essays each week (nine percent).

Discussion

One problem in the past has been an attitude in composition teaching which emphasized the final product (essay) rather than the process of writing. However, many learning theorists are beginning to see writing not as a result of thinking but as a type of thinking. In one study fifteen students who had ranked the highest on the STEP Essay writing Test in their Virginia public high school and a randomly selected comparison group were observed and then interviewed after

their writing. The differences which emerged were significant because they showed that good writers were more conscious of and deliberately practiced the process of writing more than mediocre writers.[12] That eighty-four percent of all courses surveyed in how to teach writing emphasized process is significant. This emphasis is consistent with psychological theory and research results. An awareness of process should help prospective teachers teach their own students that writing is not a mysterious or mystical act, but a logical, sequential activity.

One common reason given for teachers not teaching more writing is large class load, sometimes up to 150 to 200 students. Teachers feel they do not have the time to evaluate papers in addition to class preparation and their other school duties. College writing methods courses seem to be cognizant of this problem and to be addressing it. Many methods for evaluating student writing have been advocated including student-teacher conferences, tape recorded critiques, peer evaluation, comprehensive comments by instructors, and self evaluation. By training prospective teachers in these methods, new English instructors will undoubtedly be more willing to teach writing on the secondary level.

Donald Murray stated that "...rewriting is one of the writing skills least researched, least examined, least

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[12] C. Stallard, "An Analysis of the Writing Behaviors of Good Student Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, (1974), p. 213.

understood, and--usually--least taught."[13] The college courses surveyed are dealing with this problem to some extent. More than two thirds of the professors are teaching revision as a significant part of their course.

In addition to discussing the three highest trends, it is interesting to consider those areas that were not treated extensively in college methods courses.

It seems reasonable that a writing methods course would not concentrate on having students write fiction. Most professional teachers will be teaching students who need to learn to write clear and literate prose to survive in a career. Those teachers and also students who have an interest can take specialized creative writing courses.

It was curious to the researcher that so few courses asked training teachers to write a series of integrated plans for teaching writing in the classroom. Many students would probably find this experience most helpful, particularly if critiqued carefully by the professor. Also, new teachers are often overwhelmed with new preparation their first year of teaching. A writing program already developed under the tutelage of an expert would be most helpful. Perhaps time was the limiting factor, since students seldom had more than one quarter or one semester to finish the writing methods course.

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[13] D. Murray, "Internal Revision," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper (National council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 85.

Although few instructors had prospective teachers write once a week, many indicated that training teachers were asked to write every couple of weeks. Again, time was probably a limiting factor.

The emphasis upon writing process, evaluation, and revision should be helpful for current English teachers to assess their own practices. Are they teaching their own students that the final product is only one part of writing? Are they instructing students and providing class time for pre-writing and revision as well as writing? Is their repertoire (including peer evaluation) of evaluation techniques wide enough to allow them to assign writing often?

College English and education professors should be concerned that out of thirty-two institutions only sixteen or fifty percent required an entire course on how to teach writing. At a time when colleges, universitites, and employers are complaining about writing illiteracy, a thorough course to prepare teachers to teach their students writing skills would seem imperative.

For further study current secondary school English teachers should be surveyed to determine what emphasis is important at that level. Are current teachers finding problems or lacking skills that could be addressed in college writing methods courses? Greater articulation between high school and college teachers could improve writing instruction. If more professors

would share their skills and reservations about writing strategies, and if more high school teachers shared their skills and reservations about writing, instruction should improve.

Finally, private institutions which offer teacher training programs could also be polled. The more knowledgeable professionals are about what is being done and what needs to be done hopefully, the more students wil benefit and improve their writing skills.

TABLE 1

CONCEPTS MOST FREQUENTLY EMPHASIZED IN WRITING METHODS COURSES FOR PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS

		Percents Reporting "Always True"
1.	Course emphasizes the process of writing	84
2.	Course includes practical method of dealing with evaluation: paper load, grading	69
3.	Course includes modern rhetoric: purpose, audience, technique	66
4.	Course includes invention, generation of ideas	66
5.	Course includes instructional strategies for the process of revision	59
6.	Prospective English teachers are expected to become familiar with major research in the field	56
7.	Prospective English teachers are required to write non-fiction during the course	53
8.	Prospective English teachers grade secondary school students' papers	34
9.	Prospective English teachers analyze professional and student essays	34
10.	Course emphasizes teaching various modes	28
11.	Prospective English teachers write a sequential writing program for a designated group	16
12.	Prospective English teachers are required to write fiction during the course	13
13.	Prospective English teachers are required to write a paper once a week outside of class	9

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